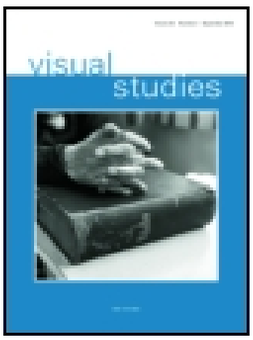

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Whose photo? Whose voice? Who listens? 'Giving,' silencing and listening to voice in participatory visual projects

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Whose photo? Whose voice? Who listens? 'Giving,' silencing and listening to voice in participatory visual projects

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This article examines participatory visual projects that aspire to enable social change by providing communities with a platform through photography. It argues that projects are sites for negotiating rather 'giving' voice and calls for practitioners and researchers to be transparent and reflexive about these negotiated processes. Examining two sets of participant-produced images by refugee youth, one of which was shown publically and one of which went unseen, this article explores issues of control and the biases that shape editorial decisions in NGO-linked participatory visual projects. It demonstrates how voices that do not fit into dominant visual frames tend to be silenced. It is argued that this negates the critical potential of participatory visual work to enable political listening and undermines the plurality of unheard voices that participatory visual work aspires to facilitate. The article raises the central question of listening to the conception of 'voice' in participatory visual initiatives. It argues that the political and ideological promise of these projects relates not only to the voices they give rise to but to the kind of listening they enable.

In recent decades, participatory visual approaches have become not only fashionable but commonplace in the visual arts, social research, activism and inclusion work. Within development and community settings, participatory visual projects that seek to 'give voice' to marginalised communities through photography, film and digital media have proliferated. In these initiatives, which utilise approaches, such as photovoice[1] and digital storytelling,[2] practitioners facilitate a process that supports participants to produce images and self-represent through visual media with the aim that their images be used as catalysts for positive social change, informing audiences and policy and to make unheard voices heard (PhotoVoice 2007; Wang and Burris 1997; Chalfen 2012). Initiatives are often underpinned by a celebratory narrative that presumes photography's capacity to 'give voice' to its producers (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010).

This article seeks to challenge and complicate the much-romanticised assumption that photography empowers by demonstrating how the promise of participatory photography is both partial and limited. It discusses two sets of images that were produced by young people as part of a NGO-linked participatory photography project with Bhutanese refugees that ran over 10 years (1998–2008) in the Bhutanese refugee camps in south-eastern Nepal. The first set of photographs was never shown publically. They depict a re-enactment of human rights abuses suffered by the Bhutanese refugee community during their exile from Bhutan. These images illustrate how participatory photography projects have the capacity to not only 'give' but also to silence voice and plural ways of representing the world that challenge or politicise. These unpublished images are compared with a set of images from pages of a photographic booklet published by the project. The images focus on day-to-day life for children growing up in the refugee camp. A micro-analysis of the conscious and unconscious editorial and ethical considerations that determined why one set of images was published and the other was not highlights how the visual 'voices' that emerge from these participatory photography projects are shaped by mobilisations of biases that reach far beyond the direct control of the participant photographers that hold the cameras.

Three inter-related arguments are made. First, it is argued that projects are sites for negotiating rather than 'giving' voice. Second, it is argued that the workings of power in these negotiations of voice are not only manifest in who is making and affirming decisions around the image-making process – decisions such as who is taking the pictures, who is editing the pictures, who is providing consent – but also in less transparent biases that shape the kind of voices that emerge. These include visual biases (an apolitical humanitarian bias in the case of this research), notions of visual authority, protection and ethical considerations and conceptions of the audience and what kinds of 'voice' they will listen to.

Third, it is argued that the concept of voice within participatory visual practices needs to be expanded beyond notions of 'speaking out' to incorporate a complex and dynamic conception of listening. Questions about who is listening, how they are listening and the conditions of listening are central to understanding the

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dynamics of public-facing participatory visual projects and are vital to achieving meaningful voice (Dreher 2012; Couldry 2010; Bickford 1996).

This argument builds on recent scholarship around listening that highlights the limits of participatory initiatives that seek to 'give' voice (Dreher 2012; Couldry 2010; Bickford 1996). Having a voice is not enough, you need to know that voice matters; voices need to be registered (Couldry 2010).[3] While speaking and voice are assumed to be vital for participation and empowerment there has been a 'theoretical neglect of listening' (Bickford 1996, 1). Enabling a 'voice that matters' (Couldry 2010) is vital to participatory visual projects committed to the goal of ensuring that voices are heard and become catalysts for change. I argue that for participatory visual work to achieve meaningful voice it needs to be concerned not only with the landscapes in which voices speak but also the kind of 'political' listening they make possible (Bickford 1996).

The article aims to build knowledge in participatory visual practice by examining the politics of voice made possible by participatory visual activism. The focus is on participatory visual work that is undertaken with the aim of enabling social change by sharing the images or visual 'voices' that come out of these projects with public audiences. This incorporates the work of both activist scholars, especially in participatory action research, and non-academic visual practitioners while recognising the variation in how these different groups employ participatory visual methods and different sectorial working practices. This position challenges categorisations that seek to split participatory visual practice into academic and non-academic strands by acknowledging the wealth of participatory visual work that lies at the intersection of these worlds and that draws on both, often involving collaborations between academics, researchers, NGOs and community organisers, activists and visual practitioners.[4] The focus then is not on participatory visual work as either academic or non-academic practice but on participatory visual projects that aim to give voice with the aim of affecting change through public dissemination of images both within and outside the academy.

The narrative that underpins popular conceptions of participatory visual work needs to be re-imagined. Aspiring to empower by handing over the camera and re-assigning the subject of the image (traditionally understood as those powerless to shape their own image) as its author is naïve and overly simplistic. There is nothing inherently empowering about photography. Power cannot be conceived of in zero-sum terms, as an object like a camera that can simply be handed over.[5]

People's access to and utilisation of photography has radically changed in the years since participatory photography emerged. None of the Bhutanese refugee youth discussed in this article had taken a photograph before our workshops started in 1998. Now almost 20 years later, like billions of people the world over, they post and share images regularly through social media. The increasing availability and dissemination of photography now offers a new form of 'citizenry' (Azoulay 2008). Within this landscape, the continuing prevalence of the popular participatory photography narrative lends a theoretical superficiality to practice and tends to distort and misguide participatory visual initiatives.

This article seeks to demonstrate how visual 'voice' in participatory photography projects is curated. By reflecting on the kinds of images that were seen and that went unseen by public audiences in a specific NGO participatory photography initiative it illustrates the protection concerns and biases that shape the discursive 'voice' that emerge from projects working with vulnerable or 'marginal' groups. It contributes to a growing body of literature that, abandoning simplistic and celebratory accounts of participatory visual practice, recognises the images and the voices and meanings they give rise to are constructed rather than self-evident. It seeks to critically explore photographic 'voice' as a negotiated, uncertain and emergent practice (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010[6]; Lykes 2010; Fairey 2017, 2015a; Kester 1995; Bishop 2012; Shaw 2014). Offering a 'sociology of voice' (Couldry 2010), the aim is to examine the conditions and workings that sanction some voices and silence others in the context of NGO-linked participatory visual work.

Participatory visual projects generate many different kinds of images and 'voices.' Everyone involved has different preferences and opinions about which images are the best, about which tell the most important story, about how the story should be told, about who is the audience and how to most effectively communicate with them. When multiple ways of seeing exist, who gets to decide what voices are too political, what images are too challenging and what is or is not appropriate? Here, participatory visual work is viewed not as an inherently empowering activity but as a political, strategic, situated, contested and paradoxical communicatory practice. It is framed as a practice that is determined as much by a politics of listening as by a politics of speaking out; a politics of listening in which what people can say is in part decided according to who is listening and what they are prepared to listen to.

Given this, we need to ask: what kind of listening do these projects facilitate? Do they enable the kind of 'political listening' (Bickford 1996) that might ensure that

marginalised voices are adequately listened to, that they become voices 'that matter' (Couldry 2010)? It is argued that we need to be more attentive to the kind of listening these projects make possible and to commit to safeguarding the vulnerable plurality of participatory visual practice. The aim is to re-connect participatory visual practice to a politics of voice and listening. Projects are examined as sites where participants are both finding and negotiating a voice and that this as a process is defined not only by their capacity to 'speak up' but also their ability to claim narrative authority and to frame a voice that will find listeners.

HUMANITARIAN VISUAL CULTURE AND THE RISE OF NGO-LINKED PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

Much as the photographic medium itself, participatory photography runs 'in all directions' (Edwards 2006, xi). Given this, before coming to the images, it seems important to take a moment to locate the type of participatory visual activism and mode of NGO-based participatory photography discussed in this research. This is important to provide a context for understanding the visual culture and biases that shaped the editorial conditions around the images and to direct our focus to the role of audiences (and their listening) in processes of speaking out.

Since the 1990s, the NGO sector has thrived with the emergence of a new set of ideas about alternative 'counter-development' practices (DeChaine 2005). Within this 'new humanitarianism' (Fox 2001) rights-based approaches have flourished. These reject top-down development models and seek to recognise the dignity and agency of the subjects of development. The 'attractive but ill-defined' notions of empowerment[7] and participation[8] are central to this push to re-frame development activities from a 'bottom-up' perspective (Craig and Mayo 1995). A broader social trend has also seen arts and cultural activities being increasingly used to meet social objectives and instrumentalised within the public sector (Yudice 2003; Bishop 2012). Working within these shifts, community workers and social researchers have come to harness culture, arts and media as mediums that enable and support grass roots participation and empowerment. Participatory photography, along with related approaches such as participatory media, participatory arts and participatory video, has thus gained currency as a tool that reassigns agency, gives 'voice' and provides a platform to the beneficiaries of NGO work that they can use to take an active role in representing the issues affecting their communities (Mayo 2000).

Many participatory visual endeavours now take place within spheres of community and international NGO development work, socially engaged arts or research activity linked to these contexts and their funding frameworks. In the last two decades, participatory visual projects have grown from a few isolated examples to an emerging genre of NGO activity made up of a diverse spectrum of initiatives that range from small community-based projects to specially designed long-term ventures enacted by large agencies and dedicated organisations (Fairey 2015a). While there is huge variation in how participatory principles and processes are being applied and used in these projects, collectively they have come to define a certain mode of NGO-linked participatory arts, media and visual work which has attracted both praise and criticism.

Much of NGO participatory visual work harnesses the capacity of projects to give participants a platform to 'speak out' to public audiences. This drive to enable beneficiaries to self-represent has also emerged out of heated debate around the integrity of the humanitarian image that dates back to the 1980s when critiques first emerged about famine imagery and images of suffering in humanitarian visual communications (Manzo 2008; Benthall 1993). Commentators have criticised the deployment of images in which NGO beneficiaries are represented as victims that need saving.

Beyond overt victim imagery, academics highlight various humanitarian visual icons that play a key role in validating humanitarian identity while stripping subjects of dignity and voice and reinforcing negative stereotypes. These include the impoverished 'Madonna' and child (Van De Gaag and Nash 1987), the lone child in close-up (Manzo 2008) and the rural peasant (Dogra 2007) and are linked to a Western imperialism that distorts public opinion and perpetuates negative perceptions of the developing world (Benthall 1993; Smith, Edge, and Morris 2006; Van de Gaag and Nash 1987; VSO 2002). The concern is that, while such images might be utilised with the good intention of raising money to benefit the depicted communities, victim-centred imagery has a paradoxical impact as it simultaneously serves to reinforce and re-inscribe those in the pictures as passive and hopeless victims (Tuck 2009; Manzo 2008; Dogra 2012). In response to these critiques, NGOs have sought to re-define the parameters and ethics of their visual identities through initiatives, such as positive image campaigns (Lidchi 1999) and ethical image-making codes and guidelines (Dochas 2006). It is against this backdrop that the promise of participatory photography has gained traction as NGOs have looked for alternative visual strategies that re-assign agency and enable a different kind of story to emerge.

THE CRISIS OF VOICE AND THE CASE FOR LISTENING

For some, however, the NGO model of participatory photography is 'broken' (Wilson-Goldie 2008). They argue that notions of visual participation and empowerment have become de-politicised empty buzzwords: projects are often tokenistic and serve as window-dressing, of more benefit to the organisers than to the beneficiaries.[9] Participants might hold the cameras but the images they create are appropriated by organisers (Ballerini 1997; Kester 1995). The photographs are filtered and curated according to NGOs' agendas and through the apolitical frames that define humanitarianism[10] and that filter out messy localised politics and challenging views. The issue is that often managerial tendencies and funding requirements that expect participatory projects to have pre-defined objectives and outcomes undermine grass roots ownership and the capacity of participatory processes to shape and build projects from the bottom up (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Tandon 1995).

The communicatory potential of images gives rise to a unique set of tensions and ethical issues around the politics and appropriation of voice in participatory visual work that compounds these critiques of tokenism and 'ambivalent neo-colonialism' (Ballerini 1997). Images travel easily and quickly from the context of their production. They exist in the world in a way that makes their re-negotiation and re-appropriation a constant possibility (Azoulay 2008). Participatory visual work is, as a result, both unstable and unpredictable. It is immersed in a politics of recognition constituted not only by using images to 'speak out' but also intimately related to practices and conditions of listening. The promise of participatory photography is tied not just to the kinds of images it creates but also to the kind of listening that those images make possible. Ethical methods and practice frameworks can only go so far in giving insight into these dynamics that actively harness the aesthetic power of images (Bishop 2012).

Couldry identifies two levels of voice; voice as process (the activity of giving an account of oneself) and voice as value (attention to the conditions under which voice is effective or by which it is undermined or rendered ineffective) (2010). Literature to date has focused on the methodology or how-to of participatory photography or, to extend Couldry's classification, participatory photography as an (ethical) process. The need now is to consider participatory photography as value – the conditions that enable or devalue voice or by which it enables some types of voice to be seen and other to remain out of sight.

WHAT GOES UNSEEN

The following sections now consider a set of unpublished participatory images and provide an analysis of the (conscious and unconscious) factors that influenced the editorial decision to not publish them in the context of the original project. The images come out of a long-term NGO-run participatory photography project that I was involved in over 10 years as a project organiser. Initially called The Rose Class, the project was later incorporated in to the Bhutanese Refugees Children's Forum (BRCF).

Running from 1998–2008, the project was a participatory arts and photography project for Bhutanese refugee youth living in refugee camps in the southern lowlands of Nepal. Voluntarily run at the beginning, it initially involved a group of 17 young people but it expanded significantly to work with hundreds of young people in various camps once funding was secured. At the peak of its activities, BRCF delivered a wide range of activities including a vocational photography programme, regular youth photography and arts workshops, the management of a photographic studio, the publication of a monthly newspaper and a local and international exhibition programme as well as engaging in national and international press and refugee advocacy work (see Figure 1).[11]

Over the 10 years that the project ran many thousands of images were produced but only small selections of these were used beyond the confines of the workshop walls. The following pages show a series of photographs that went unseen, which never made it in to the official project archive of the BRCF. They are taken by a Bhutanese refugee boy called Dinesh[12] and consist of a re-enactment, staged by Dinesh and his friends, of

FIGURE 1. Participants from the Bhutanese Refugee Children's Forum outside the project buildings which included a studio and darkroom, 2007 © Tiffany Fairey.

FIGURE 2. Figures 2–5 are a selection of images taken by a refugee youth, Dinesh, in 2007 depicting a re-enactment of the abuses suffered by the Lhotshampa people (southern Bhutanese) at the hands of the Bhutanese army. These 4 images are edited from a series of 22 photographs taken on a single role of film. 20 of these images depict different staged scenes of people being captured and tortured by army officials, the final two images are cast lineups. The photographs published here consist of some of the less graphic images and those in which the subjects are less clearly identifiable.

people being arrested and tortured by the Bhutanese authorities (see Figures 2–5).

Dinesh directed and shot the pictures, with the help of his friends in costume, in the woods that surround the refugee camp where they lived. The images were not produced as part of any specific project assignment. Dinesh had been given film with the open-ended assignment to take pictures relating to his life as a refugee. Explaining the pictures to project organisers he said he took them because, in his mind, what they told was fundamental to the story of his community and to what he wanted to communicate to others.

Dinesh's images need to be understood within the context in which he was growing up. He had been a refugee since he was 6-year–old, when his family were forced to leave their farm and go into exile.[13] Within the camps, the refugees' narrative of their forced exile from Bhutan was central to their identity and history. The documented human rights abuses[14] and torture suffered by the refugee community while still in Bhutan was widely discussed in the camps. Refugee-led political publications and pamphlets displayed graphic images of mutilated bodies and torture victims who had suffered at the hands of the Bhutanese army. Human rights abuses were an often-repeated theme and focus of the imagery produced by the Bhutanese refugee youth in the project.

This history was crucial to Dinesh's sense of who he was and where he came from. He created the images because it was a story he wanted to tell to people outside the camps. He wanted people to understand why and how he became a refugee. Despite this these images were never shown publically in the context of the project.

FIGURE 3. Figures 2–5 are a selection of images taken by a refugee youth, Dinesh, in 2007 depicting a re-enactment of the abuses suffered by the Lhotshampa people (southern Bhutanese) at the hands of the Bhutanese army. These 4 images are edited from a series of 22 photographs taken on a single role of film. 20 of these images depict different staged scenes of people being captured and tortured by army officials, the final two images are cast lineups. The photographs published here consist of some of the less graphic images and those in which the subjects are less clearly identifiable.

FIGURE 4. Figures 2–5 are a selection of images taken by a refugee youth, Dinesh, in 2007 depicting a re-enactment of the abuses suffered by the Lhotshampa people (southern Bhutanese) at the hands of the Bhutanese army. These 4 images are edited from a series of 22 photographs taken on a single role of film. 20 of these images depict different staged scenes of people being captured and tortured by army officials, the final two images are cast lineups. The photographs published here consist of some of the less graphic images and those in which the subjects are less clearly identifiable.

FIGURE 5. Figures 2–5 are a selection of images taken by a refugee youth, Dinesh, in 2007 depicting a re-enactment of the abuses suffered by the Llhotshampa people (southern Bhutanese) at the hands of the Bhutanese army. These 4 images are edited from a series of 22 photographs taken on a single role of film. 20 of these images depict different staged scenes of people being captured and tortured by army officials, the final two images are cast lineups. The photographs published here consist of some of the less graphic images and those in which the subjects are less clearly identifiable.

Such politically loaded and graphic imagery was problematic for the project organisers and the editorial decision to omit them was taken despite Dinesh's wishes and the project's claim to give Bhutanese youth like Dinesh a voice.

EDITORIAL CONTROL, INFORMED CONSENT AND VISUAL AUTHORITY

The question of editorial control in participatory photography is hotly debated. It is common practice in public facing participatory visual projects that participants input into on-going edits and have the power of veto over the inclusion of specific images. However, it is rare that participants retain full editorial and curatorial control. While some projects describe the editorial process as participatory, final edits for exhibitions, publications and circulation are invariably made by project and NGO organisers with varying levels of participant consultation (Fairey 2015a). Defending this practice in the context of non-academic practice, Hubbard argues that projects have to compete in an image market which demands the selection of compelling images in order for the images to gain an audience (2007, 20). In this way project production and editorial processes simply reflect wider practices and norms in the photographic industry where editors retain final editorial control, shaping visual stories to attract their targeted audiences. Photographers rarely ever have complete say over how their work is seen and presented (Hubbard 2007).

Participants' lack of editorial control presents a serious challenge to the projects' participatory rhetoric and claim to empower. Participants are not, as suggested, given the freedom to show the world as they see it but rather their world is presented according to an editorial and curatorial framework decided by project organisers and editors involving only a 'nominal transferal of authorship' (Ballerini 1995, 90).

This debate focuses on a conception of power as being manifest through decision-making (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). From this perspective, the question of who decides, and how, is key to designating where power lies. In the common participatory photography narrative power is aligned with control over the camera and key moments in photographic process – the question of who presses the shutter, who makes decisions in an edit.[15] However, an examination of the participatory photography process reveals that in practice it consists of an ongoing and endless series of decisions that shape and mould the emerging visual voice: What to photograph? How to photograph? Why am I photographing? What do I want to say with my photographs? What should I include in the frame? What should I exclude? How shall I edit? Which pictures shall I use? Who is my work for? How do I want my work presented? What do I want my work to achieve? These decisions are rarely taken in isolation and usually are reached through collaboration, consultation, negotiation and experimentation.[16]

While debates over who controls key moments in the photographic process are central there is a danger that it distracts us from the subtler, nebulous workings of power at play in this negotiated process of 'voice.' It is crucial to also consider the values and bias that affect and define the decision-making process, that give meaning and designate what matters are deemed of significance and what are not (Lukes 1974). While one face of power is visible and reflected in concrete decisions, a second face of power is unseen and reflected in this 'mobilisation of bias' (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Decisions are choices consciously and intentionally made; bias is mobilised and reinforced unconsciously (Lukes 1974, 21). This can be about overt coercion and manipulation but can also involve an unconscious influencing, shaping and determining of opinions.

Ethical models of participatory photography practice attempt to deal with some of the complexity around the question of editorial decision-making within a framework of 'informed' consent (PhotoVoice 2009) but it is challenging for these models to capture how and what counts as 'informed.'[17] Participants are asked to give their consent to the public use of their images and

in doing so they sanction the editing and curatorial choices that are made. Within the Bhutanese Refugee Children's Forum the young people participated in editorial processes, inputting and approving image selections. Dinesh did not dispute or challenge the decision not to exhibit his photographs and seemed acquiescent of the explanations for why they could not be used. In this sense it could be argued that he gave his informed consent to their exclusion.

Could this be an example of what Lukes terms the 'most effective and insidious' use of power; to prevent people from having grievances by shaping their perceptions in a way that 'they accept their role in the existing order of things' (1974, 24)? Cruikshank argues that empowerment programmes involve a 'voluntary and coercive exercise of power upon the subjectivity of those to be empowered' (1999, 35). In this sense empowerment, as a qualitative transformation of subjectivity, acts on people so that they come to recognise their common being within a unified administrative category that makes them compliant citizens and participants in social reform (Dean 2010, 87).

The decision not to publish Dinesh's pictures was taken for numerous well-intended, rather than insidious, reasons but they reveal something about the 'mobilisation of bias' within the project and NGO-led participatory initiatives more broadly. Central to the decision were numerous concerns relating to protection and ethics relating to his status as a child (he was 17 year-old when the pictures were taken and many of the others in the pictures were also children which meant that child protection policies applied) and as a refugee. Firstly there was a concern for Dinesh's personal protection (and of his family) if the publication of the images garnered significant attention. A second concern related to the impact and appropriateness of using graphic torture-related imagery with youth and thirdly, there was a psychosocial concern that Bhutanese youth were overly focused on past events instead of looking forward and imagining a future. An additional concern posited that the publication of such graphic and politically loaded imagery could alienate international audiences with whom the project, the refugee community, and its organisers, sought to raise awareness of the Bhutanese refugee issue. While protection concerns played the determining factor in the decision not to publish, it is important to acknowledge that the editorial decision was also shaped by the assumed expectations and preferences of the desired audience.

Underlying these concerns with the audience there is a sense that we, the project organisers, knew more and knew better than Dinesh about the appropriate use and circulation of his images. In humanitarian work, it is often assumed that beneficiaries' poverty, literacy, situation and provincialism affects their capacity to make informed decisions (Barnett and Weiss 2008). In participatory photography this often manifests itself in two ways. First, in an assumption that participants do not have enough of an awareness of the possible consequences of having their images out in the world to make a fully informed or knowledgeable decision about their publication and dissemination.[18] Second, in an assumption made by project organisers that participants are not sufficiently visually literate about the expectations and demands of audiences and international visual culture (in matters pertaining to visual quality, aesthetics and visual storytelling strategy) to make decisions about how to most effectively edit, curate and present their images to attract an audience. In short, they do not necessarily have the knowledge to best curate their images to ensure their voices have the best chance of being heard.

Project organisers' knowledge of what is implicated in disseminating images and attracting audiences lends them an authority when it comes to editorial and publication decisions. Authority here is slightly different to power; it comprises 'the ability of one actor to use institutional and discursive resources to induce deference from others' (Barnett and Weiss 2008, 38) and its exercise often contains elements of consent and coercion. Is there not the possibility in participatory editorial processes that purport to be guided by notions of informed consent, that the gaining of consent or unchallenged editorial decisions can be unduly influenced through a mobilisation of bias that asserts the authority of project organisers? Are there not elements of both assent and coercion when participants are either persuaded or dissuaded as to the inclusion or exclusion of certain images under the belief that the facilitators have the greater understanding of what is right, wrong or most appropriate to ensure their voices are listened to?

Participatory photography practitioners say that when there is a difference of opinion with participants over an image edit it is normally resolved through debate and discussion over the image, sometimes with the individual, sometimes within the group, which results in a final decision over its inclusion or omission (Fairey 2015a). Ultimately it is a question of compromise and negotiation. In practice, consent and editorial control become on-going processes of collaborative consultation rather than one-off decisions. However, they are rarely presented or discussed as such in the narratives surrounding projects, in either the academic or practice-based literature. This omission represents a lost opportunity for critical listening and for an engagement with and dialogue around the different ways we frame and see the world.

Participatory ethical approaches emphasise an emergent process of negotiating ethics with participants based on their concerns (Cahill, Sultana, and Pain 2007). Participatory visual approaches involve a similar emergent process of negotiating voice with participants. Self-reflexivity and transparency are crucial if participatory visual practitioners want to think critically about how, in these negotiated editorial processes, their own mobilisation of biases may affect how they steer and influence decisions that ultimately result in the advancing of certain visual frames and stories and the silencing of others.

The aspiration for a fully transparent participatory editorial process is misleading when notions of politics, visual culture, identity and ethics are recognised to be socio-culturally and contextually specific. The process is unstable and emergent. While debates might focus on ethical black and whites of 'good' or 'bad' models of collaboration, ultimately participatory visual work is full of grey areas which involve on-going and subjective assessments of how much or how little direction to mobilise (Bishop 2012, 33) and of what makes a good picture, story and 'voice.' Efforts to try and make these processes and negotiations more transparent are vital. They push organisers to be more accountable and reflexive about the biases and frames that shape projects, the character of the participation and engagement they engender and the context out of which these images emerge. It provides a basis from which audiences are able to understand and decipher the images and from which they can dialogue with the voices and stories they tell. Transparency facilitates 'political listening' (Bickford 1996) by making the process of 'speaking up' visible.

WHAT IS SEEN

These issues are given further dimension when Dinesh's photographs are contrasted with an edit of images that were published. This last part of the article considers how this second set of images by refugee youth have been curated to conform to humanitarian visual norms and dominant aesthetic styles, in the process editing out political voice and visual plurality. It goes on to question the kind of listening participatory photography projects enable when they fail to accommodate plural voices and different ways of seeing and framing the world. Finally, it makes a case for participatory visual work that creates opportunities for political and careful listening (Bickford 1996).

Shown here is a selection of pages from *Voices in Exile* (PhotoVoice 2006), an A5 colour paperback publication of 58 pages that was produced by PhotoVoice as a showcase of the project and as an advocacy tool to raise awareness of the Bhutanese refugee issue for international and national audiences (Figures 6–10).[19]

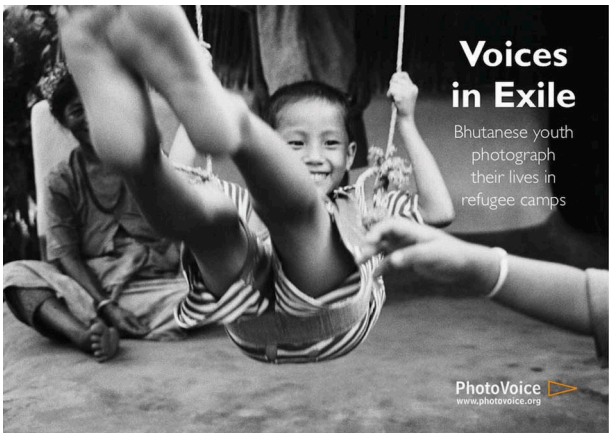

FIGURE 6. Pages from "Voices in Exile: Bhutanese youth photograph their lives in refugee camps", a photographic booklet published by PhotoVoice (2006).

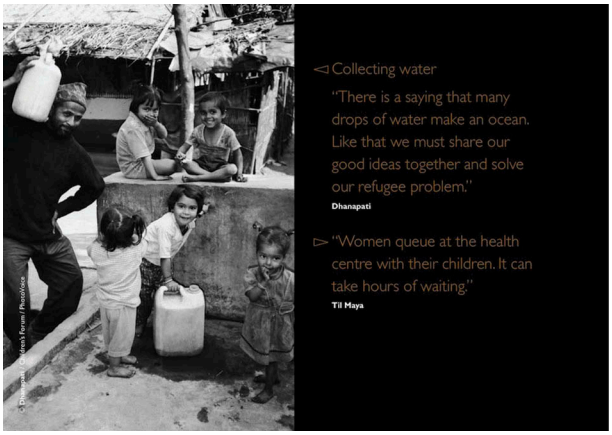

FIGURE 7. Pages from 'Voices in Exile: Bhutanese youth photograph their lives in refugee camps,' a photographic booklet published by PhotoVoice (2006).

The photo booklet depicts day-to-day life in the refugee camps covering themes such as food, health and religion. Editorial decisions were taken by the project organisers (myself included) with the aim of attracting an international audience and getting them to engage with the plight of the Bhutanese refugees. The publication was part of a series of project booklets published by PhotoVoice which follows a similar design and format. Quotes and an introductory text provide a brief political context to their situation but give limited detail. There are no visual references to the human rights abuses central to the identity of many in the camps.

Voices in Exile's communicatory strategy involved a conscious choice to not make the content too 'political' for both protection reasons and a concern that it would be too controversial and alienate international audiences.[20] Instead universal ahistorical 'refugee' categories were relied on to tell the Bhutanese story (Malkki 1996). Like Dinesh, some of the young

FIGURE 8. Pages from 'Voices in Exile: Bhutanese youth photograph their lives in refugee camps,' a photographic booklet published by PhotoVoice (2006).

FIGURE 9. Pages from 'Voices in Exile: Bhutanese youth photograph their lives in refugee camps,' a photographic booklet published by PhotoVoice (2006).

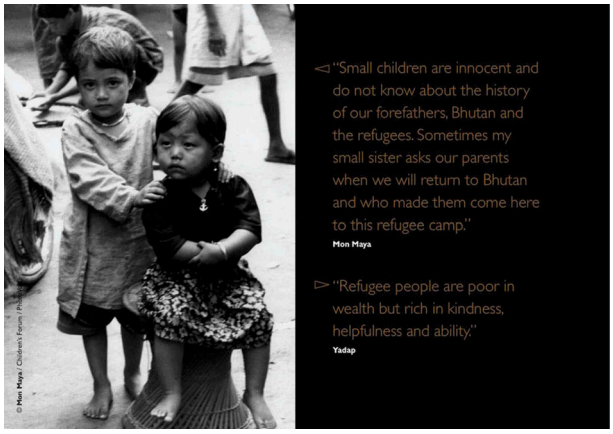

FIGURE 10. Pages from 'Voices in Exile: Bhutanese youth photograph their lives in refugee camps,' a photographic booklet published by PhotoVoice (2006).

participants wanted to concentrate on the political roots and human rights background to their exile but as organisers we deemed this history an inappropriate focus for advocacy and awareness-raising work. This followed the general stance taken by NGOs working in the camps that, following the apolitical humanitarian tradition, sought to keep their activities and campaigning at a distance from anything that could be perceived as overt refugee politics.

The notion of the 'unseen,' the question of what is not in the picture, as well as what is in the picture, is crucial to understanding how visual stereotyping in humanitarianism works (Manzo 2008). The *Voices in Exile* images are taken by the refugee youth, by 'insiders,' but they tell a familiar humanitarian tale of refugees living in limbo that avoids delving into the specific politics in which these people are immersed.[21] In sharp contrast to Dinesh's images, politics is visually absent from these photographs.

For NGO-led participatory communication initiatives, self-representational agendas will always have to negotiate with the communications priorities of the other stakeholders, organisers and funders. This will inevitably give rise to the tensions, challenges and paradoxes. When communities are provided with the means to 'self-represent' in the humanitarian mode they might want to talk of the political and systematic issues that shape and affect their lives but whether this 'voice' is given a public airing would seem to depend on the discursive and communicatory strategies, the biases and the limits defined by the NGO partners involved. When the 'voice' these projects give rise to is understood as contested and negotiated between participants, communities and organisers then the crucial question about the stories that emerge becomes not only 'whose' are they but also who stands to gain from them and who is constrained by them?

A closer analysis of the *Voices in Exile* images and its general tone reveals how apolitical humanitarian visual modes serve as an additional visual 'mobilisation of bias' (Bachrach and Baratz 1962) that shape the aesthetic and discursive framing of NGO-linked participatory photography and the 'voice' they give rise to. The classic close-up image of the child is central to the humanitarian visual lexicon (Manzo 2008) and *Voices in Exile's* apolitical tone is visually embodied in its extensive focus on images of children. Of a total of 38 images by participant photographers, nearly 60% are of lone children, youth or prominently feature children. The photographers are themselves young people so it is inevitable that their imagery focuses on youth but to what extent was the edit biased towards the inclusion of more images of children under the (unconscious) belief that such images would have a greater appeal to

international humanitarian and NGO audiences and 'tug the heart strings' (Hubbard 2007, 14)?

What goes 'unseen' in the images of lone children is documentation of people's local network of support, care and protection, implying their failure and the child's dependence on outside forces (Manzo 2008; Dogra 2012). Decontextualised images of children fail to tell the whole story and hide the political-economic connections that link viewers' histories with those of 'those poor people over there' (Malkki 1996, 388). Clearly a publication of photography taken by refugee youth is going to feature their friends and youth focused activities but the point here is more about the tone of the images of children featured, the narrative they construct and the voice they give rise to. Dinesh's photographs showed young refugees as young political actors but in contrast the children in *Voices in Exile* allude to a universal humanistic category of childhood (Hopkins and Sriprakash 2016).

The visual aesthetic and social documentary style of *Voices in Exile* echoes the dominant tradition of socially engaged documentary photography that is widely utilised by professional image-makers and within NGO communications. Bleiker and Kay argue that different photographic representational styles embody the different ways we give meaning to political phenomena (2007). They juxtapose 'pluralist' (participatory) photography with humanist photography, arguing that rather than aiming to capture a generic and universal notion of humanity, pluralist (participatory) photography uses photographic representation as a method 'to validate multiple local knowledge and practices, thereby disrupting existing hierarchies and power relationships' (2007, 141).

However, viewing the *Voices with Vision* edit many would question how disruptive NGO-linked participatory photography is when editorial choices result in the silencing of political voices and the forwarding of a humanist perspective. Participatory photography may give rise to a visual plurality but this plurality is vulnerable and easily manipulated when it fails to fit into the desired or required visual frame. In the case of the images discussed, this is a dominant humanitarian visual mode that pursues consensus rather than confrontation under the assumption that audiences do not want to hear about complex political histories.

ENABLING DIFFICULT LISTENING

Dinesh's images did not fit the humanist visual mode. Their aesthetic constitutes a form of performative documentary that blurs the lines of fiction and documentary.[22] They challenge viewers: the graphic scenes of violence jar with the young smiles of the cast line up (not shown); they require an explanation and context; they force the viewer to ask questions. Dinesh's images require careful listening but they enable a political engagement with the viewer. This constitutes a form of political listening that Bickford proposes is vital in democratic politics (1996). It can be challenging and unsettling but is a form of listening that, recognising the contentious and conflictive character of politics, does not necessarily look to resolve conflict or air brush it out but rather seeks to enable actors to clarify the nature of the conflict at hand, engage in a dialogue and decide how to move forward democratically.

Recent critiques of the digital storytelling genre suggest it may actually contribute to limited listening because of its prescriptive formats and sentimental tendencies (Dreher 2012). The affirmative tone of projects and their events, which are often characterised by a feel-good and celebratory mood, might even 'work against overtly political forms of listening or engagement with stories' (7). These projects might gain praise from a sympathetic audience but do they generate political listening that involves a sustained engagement with and response to the issues raised by the marginal voice?

The focus here is not so much on the rights and wrongs of the editorial decision around Dinesh's images but more broadly on the kind of listening that participatory visual projects strive to enable. It is a strategic question about the kind of listening projects facilitate and how they can enable a kind of careful listening to ensure the voices they give rise to matter (Couldry 2010). When projects silence voices that are unfamiliar, that do not fit mainstream visual frames, that are unsettling or too political, do they obstruct opportunities for projects to act as catalysts for the kind of listening that might make marginalised voices matter?

The challenge is that a commitment to the pursuit of 'political' listening requires projects to embrace uncertainty, risk and political complexity and this is not always possible or desirable, especially within the parameters of NGO work. Editorial decisions in the BRCF were taken not only on the basis of a specific visual and advocacy strategy developed within the parameters of an NGO project that advocated a 'violence-free children's society' (BRCF 2006) but also in accordance with an ethical approach that deemed participants' welfare and protection to be of paramount importance (PhotoVoice 2009). Publishing Dinesh's images could have jeopardised his and his family's position if it was ever possible for them to return to

Bhutan. While participatory approaches aim to create social change rather than to do no harm (Cahill, Sultana, and Pain 2007) ultimately much NGO work with vulnerable groups is risk-averse. There is uncertainty as to when protective tendencies might serve to undermine the agency of the participants that projects seek to 'empower.' Is there not a danger in participatory projects that seek to 'give voice' and enable people to self-represent that this aversion to risk patronises both participants and audiences, negates the critical creative potential of participatory visual work and results in the burying and silencing of voices?

These tensions are unresolvable. However, it is clear that as practitioners we need to commit to enabling a form of critical and careful listening that moves beyond a celebration of images that speak out and that ensures the voices that emerge from these projects are actively listened to. Here the emphasis is not only on the participants who are doing the speaking but on the institutions and organisers who facilitate their speaking and their assumptions about what audiences will and will not listen to. Everyone involved will have his or her own opinion about what should and should not be in a 'refugee' story and these opinions shape and constrain what the voices in these projects look like and what gets seen.

CONCLUSION: SAFEGUARDING VISUAL PLURALITY

The tone and aesthetic of these two sets of images represent two very different versions of the myriad possible ways of seeing the Bhutanese refugees. They illustrate two different modes of 'speaking up' which in turn create different opportunities for listening and engaging. They demonstrate that there is no authentic voice that emerges out of participatory photography projects but rather a range of stories and perspectives that are considered and edited according to a particular strategic aim embedded within a particular set of power relations. Projects emboldened by the noble desire to 'give voice' often fail to conscientiously recognise the multiple ways there are to see and the danger of a single story (Adichie 2009). Whoever is holding the camera we must remain aware that,

> *'Cultures' do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship'* (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 10)

The tensions around control, power and what goes unseen in participatory visual projects have made many wary and doubtful. NGO communications professionals refer to having seen many 'shoddy' and 'tokenistic' projects that apply participatory photography methods 'lazily' where projects 'are making a nod towards doing something more right on but are more interested in the media hits than engaging communities.[23] There is a question as to what extent participatory visual work can be conducted under the auspices of NGOs when the images produced hold a communications currency that the NGO inevitably needs to control. The interests of NGOs and the interests of the participants are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may well align but this cannot be assumed. Inevitably there is a process of negotiation, which ultimately involves the compromise of one party's priorities for the others.

Through their editorial processes participatory photography projects silence some voices and bring others to the foreground. In NGO-linked initiatives, editorial processes that are confined and shaped by NGO communicatory agendas inevitably result in the exclusion of voices that do not tally, that are unfamiliar or that are deemed too challenging, political or risky. As practitioners we need to be alert to how this happens and of our personal, professional and sectorial biases. We need to ensure that the potential for participatory photography initiatives to act as vehicles for voices is not undermined. We need to safeguard visual plurality.

Images, and how meanings become attached to them, are unpredictable. Despite *'Voices in Exile'* having been curated for an international audience it was actually from within the refugee community that demand came for its reprint. As the Bhutanese refugee community faced the prospect of re-settlement in third countries, the publication became popular as a memento of life in the refugee camps. Is this evidence of the refugee community absorbing their own humanitarian image or does it not aptly illustrate that the meaning of a photograph is never final (Azoulay 2012)? While an image might be intended for one purpose, no one can ever control or predict how it will actually be used and re-imagined. The great potency of photography lies in its plurality and its open-ended capacity for re-invention and re-appropriation.

Voice, too, is irreducibly plural and failing to respect the inherent differences between voices means we fail to recognise voice at all (Couldry 2010, 8). Emerging voices are vulnerable; they are easily appropriated, restricted and drowned out. There has to be a shift in focus that looks beyond 'speaking up' towards the conventions, institutions and discursive biases that shape what voices can be heard and that set the tone for listening. People are not free to define their own image or voice; it is always something that

is haggled over. However, is there not a strategy whereby projects, as opposed to trying to homogenise or contain voices into a singular more digestible frame for viewers, commit to being transparent about their production processes and to helping viewers to recognise that 'the process of representation is inherently incomplete and inevitably political' by creating multiple sites and ways for representing and understanding the issues at stake (Bleiker and Kay 2007, 141)? Photography would then facilitate a mode of pluralised mediation whereby the represented person takes an active role in telling their story and making meaning but without attaching it to an exclusive claim that undermines or silences other positions and experiences (Debrix and Weber 2003, ix).

Strategies that pursue pluralised mediation and possibilities for more effective and political listening involve risk. They recognise the politics of listening as being central to a politics of voice. Who is listening and how are they listening? How are participatory images disseminated and who is their audience? Here, the images are not seen as the end point but rather as a starting point for an on-going process of engagement, debate, negotiation and response. There is a focus on the spaces for and the character and quality of listening those projects created. It is uncertain work, for it is not possible to predict how audiences will react. Some might turn away, some might be offended but others might listen more actively.

The promise of participatory photography projects lies not only with who is taking the pictures but also with the people who are looking at them and who take them seriously. When we think of the question of listening, Dreher argues, we pose the question of change in terms of 'learning new ways for the centre to hear rather than simply requiring the marginalised to speak up' (2010, 100). If we are to adequately listen to marginal voices we have to learn to listen to stories that might sometimes be unsettling or painful, histories that are uncomfortable, perspectives that are critical, told in languages that are not familiar or easy to understand. But as the means and possibilities for voice and speaking out become increasingly democratised and accessible, practitioners can shift their focus to providing platforms and opportunities for difficult listening; to enable marginal voices to be heard and to matter; to providing audiences with opportunities to engage with the many different ways there are to see the world. The need is for projects to not only support communities to negotiate their voice but to work to ensure that those voices are listened to.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

[1] Photovoice is a participatory action research method that combines photography with grassroots social action (Wang and Burris 1997). Developed to enable community consultation and policy advocacy, photovoice has become increasingly popular with social science researchers. The term has been widely adopted by practitioners working with participatory photography methods and is used by various NGOs, organisations and projects such as the UK based charity PhotoVoice (www.photovoice.org).

[2] Digital storytelling is a short-form digital media production process that enables ordinary people with little or no digital media experience to produce personal stories using digital stories. Pioneered by the Centre for Digital Storytelling (now known as Story Centre: http://www.storycenter.org/), digital storytelling techniques and formats (Lambert 2013) have become increasingly popular as a community development and media tool and have been used all over the world in education, social inclusion and services, public health and international development projects.

[3] Couldry (2010) posits that the recent explosion of 'voice' is illusory; neo liberal conditions serve to undermine voice for it is increasingly offered but in important respects denied. There is a crisis in voice because no provision is made for listening alongside offers of voice.

[4] Existing categorisations of participatory visual practice distinguish between public facing participatory visual 'projects' that aim to have social impact and affect change and academic-oriented participatory visual 'studies,' undertaken for social research purposes with the aim of producing scholarly knowledge (Pauwels 2015; Chalfen 2012). They emphasise that in participatory visual activism 'projects' images are treated and celebrated as end points, and disseminated for public consumption, in contrast to research 'studies' where images are treated as mid-points in the production of knowledge (Chalfen 2012, Pauwels 2015). Whilst I would challenge the idea that public facing participatory project celebrate images as 'end-points,' I agree there are important distinctions to be made between projects that share and disseminate images with public audiences and those that do not. However the proposed dichotomy that seeks to divide the field into public projects and academic studies is unhelpful in the context of this research. It fails to capture the academic based work in the fields of participatory action research and activism scholarship and those academic-grounded practitioners and their projects which represent a blended approach to participatory visual work that draws on both academic and research frameworks and participatory and visual practice expertise.

[5] Theorists rejecting binary views of power have long argued that power permeates all aspects of social relations and call attention to how power operates on and across multiple spheres, through discourse and institutions, self-governance and diverse technologies and regimes; consciously and overtly, unconsciously and

subversively, intra-personal and structurally (Foucault 1984; Stewart 2001; Gaventa 2006).

[6] *Visual Studies* Volume 25, issue 3 contains various articles that address questions around how voice is conceptualised, produced and analysed in participatory visual approaches.

[7] Within development discourse the concept of empowerment has evolved from Paulo Freire's radical philosophy of emancipatory education which proposes every human being can develop an awareness of self and reclaim the right to define their own worlds (1973). A broad working understanding of empowerment designates it as a multi-dimensional social process that enables people to gain control over their own lives; a process that fosters power (in terms of the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important (Page and Czuba 1999).

[8] Championed by Robert Chambers (1997) and his development of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), at the heart of participatory approaches lies the aim to increase the involvement of marginalised groups in decision-making over matters that affect their own lives. Frierian principles form the basis of participatory approaches to facilitation and training used in international and community developments contexts. Within NGO rhetoric, the concept of empowerment goes hand in hand with the idea of participation. The two ideas share the same concerns but they have also been critiqued by those who argue the terms have lost their radical edge and become meaningless in their ubiquity (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

[9] These arguments are well-illuatrated in the debate generated by the oscar-winning Kids With Cameras film, Born into Brothels (Briski and Kaufman 2004). The filmakers were accused of profiting more than the participants out of the project and film's success (Banerjee 2005; Frann 2007).

[10] The first four core principals, humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, captured in the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross adopted in 1969 have become the bywords for the humanitarian sector (Barnett and Weiss 2008). The principles of neutrality and independence state that sides cannot be taken in hostilities and that humanitarian organisations or workers must remain independent of government policies or actions and refrain from engaging in controversies of a political, radical, religious or ideological nature. The principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence all seek to assert the non-political character of humanitarianism and its associated activities.

[11] For further information and images from the project please see: http://bhutaneserefugees.com/in-camps/ (Accessed 16 May 2017).

[12] Dinesh is not the photographer's real name. A pseudonym has been used to protect his identity.

[13] The Bhutanese refugee population belong to a ethnic group called the Llotshampas, the southern Bhutanese whom are of Nepalese ethnicity, and who fled and were forcibly evicted from Bhutan in the early 1990s in connection with discriminatory government legislation and practices (Amnesty International 2000, 2002; Hutt 2003; Human Rights Watch 2003). For a full background to the Bhutanese refugee situation please see www.bhutaneserefugees.com (accessed 10 May 2015).

[14] Amnesty International (2000, 2002); Norwegian Refugee Council (2008).

[15] The suggestion is that complete ownership of photography is possible if mastery of those moments is realised. This corresponds with the historically dominant discourse in photography that focuses on the singular power of the photographer and their claims to ownership and control of the image (Azoulay 2012).

[16] Should complete mastery or sole control of these decisions be the ultimate aim of participatory initiatives? Is that desirable or even possible? When we understand participatory photography as a plural activity in which all the participants – the photographer, the subject, the facilitators and organisers, the community, the implicated organisations, the donors and funders, its disseminators – have the possibility, within their own capacities and interests, of laying claim to the process then photography, like a Foucauldian concept of power, becomes something that no one owns. Attempts to designate full control of the process to participants seem both misconstrued and fruitless.

[17] Authors such as Homan (1991) argue that the notion of true informed consent, where participants are given a full explanation and are able to reach a clear understanding of what participation involves and its consequences, exists more in rhetoric than reality. Despite this, the term is widely employed to designate a consent process rooted in set of principles relating to ethical and responsible consent models.

[18] This position has become particularly charged in recent years with the rapid rise of social media and online culture where concerns about the digital dissemination and potential mis-appropriation and mis-use of digital images have given rise to a raft of new protection issues relating to the public sharing of images.

[19] 1000 copies of *Voices in Exile* were distributed to participants, camps schools and libraries, agencies working with the Bhutanese refugees, key institutions and figures within media and political scene in Nepal and through selected book shops in Kathmandu (PhotoVoice report to Comic Relief, 2007). A 2nd print run of 500 copies was disseminated in the refugee camps themselves.

[20] This follows a widely accepted argument that when content crosses a line that moves it into the realm of the personalized and political its moral authority vanishes; audiences switch off, untrusting of its content and message (Kester 1998).

[21] Lisa Malkki's research with refugees in Burundi offers interesting parallels. She highlights the gap between how the Hutu refugees came to appropriate the category of 'refugee,' powerfully shaped by the collective memory of violence and past atrocities in Burundi, and how the staff of the international organisations administering the camps defined refugee identity in terms that made this historical and political identity unusable (1996).

[22] The performative character of photography as a form of participatory citizenship is also relevant when we think of how Dinesh's photographs as a performative act (Levin 2009). It could also be argued that Dinesh's work could also be analysed as a form of political theatre but the focus of this discussion is on his work as photography, its currency as a visual object and its sites of audiencing (Rose 2007) as a photograph rather than as a performative piece of theatre.

[23] Quotes taken from interviews with NGO communications professionals from the image units of leading INGOs including Chistian Aid, Save the Children and Action Aid. See Fairey 2015a (Chapter 3) for full details.

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